

# ON THE BRINK OF AN ABYSS

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Fashion doesn't have it easy these days. If we understand it as a portrayal or reflection of the circumstances in society, what do the things to which we attribute the status of fashion say about our present relationship to the world? At the end of the twentieth century, fashion theorist Caroline Evans saw it on the brink of an abyss. In *Fashion at the Edge*<sup>1</sup> she puts the concepts of designers such as Martin Margiela, Alexander McQueen and John Galiano for Dior into a cultural-theoretical context she calls "post-industrial-modernity." By that she means the so far generally nameless era which somehow follows the previous one, is somehow different,

somehow more up to date, and somehow better capable of reconciling the disappointment over modernism's broken promise with the desire to carry on.

The philosopher Wilhelm Schmid speaks in this context of a "different modernity" he considers borne "by an enlightened enlightenment ... which is not convinced that pure reason will someday create perfect circumstances."<sup>2</sup> That would also be an age shaped by its reflexive use of the "accomplishments of modernity, namely its liberties in the various areas,"<sup>3</sup> and by the tragic awareness of its limits, leading ultimately to the acceptance of the structural indissolubility

## ESSAY

of the contradictions modernity refused to acknowledge. A meaningful life, Schmid observes, "can perhaps only exist where contradictions force one to bridge their unfathomability by shaping ways of life"<sup>4</sup>—an unfathomability that, in a world that negates every contradiction, is doomed. In the face of threatening ambiguities—to become a self-destructive tragedy—how else could "the remaining" forces that strive to persist in space and those that seek progress in time"<sup>5</sup> be dealt with, and how can the desire that never goes away, due to the impossibility of its fulfillment, have its cake and eat it too? The art of living in the "different modernity" would, in Schmid's view, consist of "finding a *modus vivendi* that would at least allow contradictions to co-exist and not to end in mutual destruction, even in cases of the most irreconcilable situations of conflict."<sup>6</sup> The art of living may also consist in making use of the creative energies that lie concealed within the fragile balance of mutually resistive forces, a balance that never reveals itself for more than a brief instant and, in the moment of its recognition, already belongs to the long-gone past: "Only between contradictions that appear to exclude one another and consummately interoperate does the tension exist that permits the greatest intensity of life to become perceivable,"<sup>7</sup> as well as the intensity that seeks to transform art into an outward manifestation. But what kind of manifestation is it that conceals the acceptance of ambiguity within itself?

Fashion is essentially something highly contradictory. The only reliable thing about it is its unreliability. In the form of clothing, each season it once again formulates the measure of all things, only to replace it a few months later with a different such measure. It is perhaps pre-

cisely that aspect, so willingly dismissed as superficial, where fashion's mastery reveals itself. Perhaps only there can it serve as an example for all who aspire to risk dancing between mutually exclusive extremes, life on the tightrope over the abyss. Perhaps it is fashion, with its playfully paradoxical nature, that is capable of giving form to ultimate simultaneity.

At the same time, it is the individual who for Schmid, regarding the obviously contradictory conditions of life in a different modernity, becomes the focus of interest: "Individuals who for their 'own lives' claim modern liberties, in the process experiencing the risks and constraints, indeed, perceiving the necessity of leading one's own life as a constraint, are compelled—in light of the new challenges—to begin by 'themselves inventing and testing' ways of living and forms of co-existence."<sup>8</sup> Ideally, Schmid continues, this will result in a functioning art of life, born of contemplation, withdrawal and melancholy, independent of economic, political or ideological interests that have hitherto possessed free, enlightened individuals. A life of that kind also offers fertile ground for the creation of specific forms capable of giving that life expression.

Every two years, the Nordic Fashion Biennale unites designers from a part of the world whose natural living environment has always made extreme demands on those who live in it. It demands a certain way of dealing with things, which continues to affect even those who have not lived in the place of their origin for a long time, continuing to bear an influence on their artistic practices. What is the form taken by this specific weighing of contradictions in places of unsuspected inhospitality? What can be learned from this form

by all those who live in seemingly more hospitable regions? Does this difference really even exist? Or can a truth about the familiar always be found in everything foreign? Are the contradictions we have to face in a different modernity absolute? Our way of dealing with them continues to invent new, inspiring forms for the entirely personal exploration of a life whose meaning seems to lie in finding a centre somewhere between all and nothing.

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1 Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness* (Yale, 2007).

2 Wilhelm Schmid, *Philosophie der Lebenskunst: Eine Grundlegung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), p. 105.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, p. 110.